



Access World News

Thieves risk their lives for copper

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) - Monday, May 7, 2007

Author: Leah Thorsen ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

\$3.20 A POUND

Copper wiring, pipes, gutters and more are stolen to be sold as scrap metal.

7,200 VOLTS

Thieves who cut their way in to an electric co-op could have been electrocuted.

Copper is gold in the Metro East area, where thieves are willing to risk death to salvage what has become a lucrative scrap metal.

Southwestern Electric Cooperative has become part of a running tally of area business plagued by copper-seeking thieves.

Five of the utility's substations have been broken into in the last month, the culprits making off with thousands of dollars in copper wiring and equipment, said Joe Richardson, a Southwestern spokesman.

The burglars cut chains and used wire cutters to snip fences to get inside stations in Troy, Holiday Shores, Edwardsville, Pocahontas and Worden, he said.

In one of the break-ins, the thieves somehow energized a concrete pad and were lucky not to be shocked by 7,200 volts of electricity.

"They're going to get themselves killed," Richardson said.

Copper theft is also a problem in Missouri, where thieves have long made a habit of pilfering gutters and pipes.

That is because the price of the metal has climbed in recent years. A pound of the metal was worth up to \$3.20 - well above average - last week in St. Louis.

Because of these prices, AmerenUE substations also have been targeted in the last year, said spokeswoman Erica Abbett. She would not release statistics about how often or where the break-ins took place but said that these burglaries had increased and that the utility had increased security around its substations.

Such thefts concern many in the scrap metal industry.

"We do everything possible not to buy stolen copper," said Frank Sophie, a co-owner of Southern Metal Processing in St. Louis.

Those precautions include following city-mandated rules such as requiring copper sellers to show a photo ID and provide their license plate numbers. A couple of months ago, his business also quit buying gutters and downspouts from anyone other than certain businesses.

"We don't buy anything out of grocery carts," Sophie said.

It's not just utilities being targeted. In the last year, thieves have hit churches, schools and state buildings in East St. Louis. The shuttered Chemetco plant in Hartford has been broken into more than a dozen times.

On Thursday, Madison County prosecutors charged Kevin Corrigan, 18, of Granite City with felony theft; they

accuse him of stealing 50 pounds of copper wire last week from Hopcroft Electric in Glen Carbon.

A day earlier, construction workers arrived at the Belleville Crossing construction site to find that thieves had torn copper wiring and plumbing from the walls of the Target and Home Depot stores going up there, said Roger Barfield, the city's assistant police chief. No dollar figure on the damage or theft was available.

He said that a few copper thefts had happened at construction sites in the city but that the burglary at the shopping center under construction near Illinois Route 15 was unusual.

Said Barfield: "It's one of the biggest we've had here."

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Access World News

THREE CAUGHT ON CAMERA AT PLANT

Belleville News-Democrat, The (IL) - Friday, January 26, 2007

Author: *Brian Brueggemann*

By Brian Brueggemann

News-Democrat

DASH: -

Madison County sheriff's detectives are seeking the public's help in identifying three people whose images were caught on security cameras at the closed Chemetco plant in Hartford.

Sheriff's Lt. Brad Wells said the plant has been the site of many past thefts in which scrap metal was stolen.

Security cameras have been installed at the plant, and on Monday, they caught the images of three people at about 3:30 a.m.

Two of the subjects in the photos might be wearing camouflage. The other, whose face isn't shown, is wearing a light-colored, hooded jacket under dark clothing.

Wells said Thursday it had not yet been determined whether anything was stolen by the three people.

Police asked that anyone with information call Madison County detectives at 692-0871 or an anonymous tip line at 296-3000.

Contact reporter Brian Brueggemann at bbrueggemann@bnd.com or 692-9481.

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Thefts of scrap metal soar with prices Break-in at Chemetco complex illustrates problem; recycling rules may tighten.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO) - Friday, January 26, 2007

Author: Adam Jadhav ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

A dozen times in less than a year thieves have hit the shuttered Chemetco industrial complex.

This time, three suspects tripped alarms about 3:30 a.m. Monday and briefly showed their faces to security cameras. The Madison County Sheriff's Office responded, but the trio escaped.

Detectives say the thieves are after valuable scrap metal, despite the presence of hazardous slag and sludge on the 40-acre site.

"They go and lift some metal and they sell it, and they can get a few hundred bucks for it," said Sheriff's Lt. Brad Wells, who is investigating the Monday morning break-in. "It's happening all around the state and country."

With scrap metal prices holding well above historic norms, especially for copper and aluminum, thieves seem ready to risk life and limb for the once-not-very-precious metals. The spate of thefts - from copper downspouts off houses to cable at cell phone towers - has law enforcement and the Illinois and Missouri legislatures clamoring for answers.

In both states, legislation is being proposed to require metal recyclers to set up registries of their suppliers, adding a layer of disclosure and a potential investigative trail to the sometimes loose trade of scrap metal.

"It's similar in concept to the pawnbroker rules - keeping an accurate record of just who is bringing in goods for sale," said state Sen. Bill Haine, D-Alton, who plans to sponsor legislation. "It'll make it easier on the police to locate a stolen item. We've got to do something, because this is getting out of control."

The St. Louis Board of Aldermen is expected to consider a similar measure.

This past winter a telephone substation in Godfrey was hit twice, Wells said. The bankrupt Chemetco plant, under seal by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, is a continual target.

In East St. Louis, thieves at a church ignored the collection plate and instead went for copper tubing from three massive air conditioners and aluminum gutters and downspouts.

In St. Louis, there's a new scrap metal theft reported practically every day, police said. Houses under construction are a popular target for piping, but thieves have even stolen plumbing out from under occupied homes.

And they've gotten consistently more daring. Last month, an electric substation was hit for copper electrical cables. The incident knocked out power for a while to a nursing home in north St. Louis.

Reports have come in of drug addicts' dredging up scrap metal and turning it into cash for their habits, police said. And according to reports from around the area, thieves have struck cell phone towers from O'Fallon, Mo., to Kansas City for cables.

High-grade copper sold for as high as \$2.40 a pound on Thursday, well above historical norms. The price went as high as about \$3.50 a pound last year, almost entirely because of demand from China.

"This is the criminal version of supply and demand," said Missouri state Rep. Jeff Roorda, D-Barnhart, sponsor of a scrap metal measure. "Now that the salvage price for scrap metal has gotten so high, a lot of thieves are engaging in some pretty bold criminal activity."

Metal scrap buyers say they want to help police but are resistant to measures they say would be burdensome. The Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, the major Washington lobby for the industry, has opposed proposals that would require recyclers to tag and separate material as it came in.

The Illinois and Missouri proposals right now would only require the companies to document who is bringing material to be sold, something that is more palatable to the industry, said Allan Roodman, an owner of Top Metal Buyers Inc.

Managers at Roodman's East St. Louis company already screen small sellers and accept metal only from people with whom they feel comfortable. They also get online alerts from the lobbying group to track and identify suspicious sales.

"We want to work with the police, and a log wouldn't really be too much of a burden," Roodman said. "But keeping all material separate and holding it for inspection, well, that's just not going to be feasible."

Caption: PHOTO

PHOTO - A photo taken by a security camera about 3:30 a.m. Monday shows intruders at the shuttered Chemetco smelter in Hartford.

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